

## Private: Semiotics – Definitions And Terminology

© 09/11/2013

 Tweet

 Share

 Share

 Pin

 Share

 Mail



*Ferdinand de Saussure with historically accurate head wear*

What is semiotics and why is it important?

Semiotics is the study of signs and how they are used. What sounds like a pretty dull academic thing turns out to be hugely important for any form of communication and media creation. Semiotics overlaps with linguistics – the study of language – but goes further by not only examining how words work and

how they are used, but also looking at images, sounds, gestures, music, code, patterns and more...

Semiotics allows us to explore how any measure of communication generates meaning. It allows us to explore the unique interplay of visuals, audio, words, interfaces and mechanics, that we find in games.

Improving design

skills and

media literacy To me as an artist, semiotics are super helpful in creating effective designs to resonate with various audiences. And for me as an art director and teacher, semiotics is essential in exchanging ideas about design, debating effective design and making collaborative design efforts more goal oriented. Effective signing makes monsters scary, user interfaces intuitive, cars fast, galaxies wide and intellectual properties memorable. Knowledge is power.

Semiotics examines communication measures and their meaning individually and in relation to each other. This approach makes it possible to look for the most effective measures for whatever meaning we are trying to convey.

It also works the other way around. With semiotics we can examine the used communication measures of any piece of media and explore the multiple meanings in its text and subtext. This is important for consumers, so they understand how media influences them and what tricks creators use to convey their meanings to their audiences. It's also important for creators, so they can check their communication for unintended meanings and ambient noise, and sharpen their message.

## Terminology

**Meaning** Also known in semiotic terms as *the signified*. This is what a creator wants to communicate and/or what an audience understands. These two things unfortunately are rarely congruent. Almost always some meaning is conveyed accidentally or gets lost on the way from the creator to the audience.

**Signifier** This is what creators present to their audience to convey meaning and/or what audiences imbue with meaning, when they are presented with it. A signifier itself has no meaning, but generates meaning when people use it to say something or gain any sort of understanding from it.

**Signs** A sign emerges, when a signifier and a meaning (the signified) come together. A meaning can be conveyed with a multitude of signifiers and a signifier can create a multitude of meanings, depending on interpretation and context. Each combination of signifier and meaning gets counted as a sign.

Many signs are part of language systems, like spoken languages, musical notation, traffic signage, sequential storytelling, user interfaces, stereotypes, game mechanics. These systems emerge when groups of people decide to agree on relating specific signifiers with specific meanings.

**Icon** This is one form of signs, in which a signifier is perceived to be similar to a meaning. For examples when an image looks similar to what a viewer thinks an apple looks like, then this image means “apple” to that viewer and we have an icon.

**Index** This is one form of signs, in which a signifier has a causal relationship with a meaning. When a viewer sees smoke coming out of a building and concludes, that there must be a fire, then the smoke means “burning building” to that viewer. Or when a person hears a howling sound, recognizes it as a fire engine siren and that it is coming closer, then this sounds means “approaching fire engine” to that person.

**Symbol** In contrast to icons and indexes, symbols are arbitrary signs. The connection between one specific signifier and one specific meaning is not based on similarity or causal relationship. It’s based only on conventions, laws and rules, which are established by humans for humans. The signs “a”, “p”, “l”, and “e”, arranged in sequence as “apple” only relate to the fruit because humans some day arbitrarily decided to create a system in which that fruit would be represented by those signs.

- Editor’s note: A proper academic is most likely going to contort in agony reading my definitions here. I prefer to treat the terminology as it can be applied to design, so that definitions become more useful for what howtonotsuckatgamedesign is about. For a more by the book and comprehensive angle on semiotics, you can check [wikipedia](#).

---

## 4 Comments



06/02/2014 at 6:05 am

Isnt Sassure obsolete? I mean Lingüistics are all about Chomsky and Pinker now, and they are mostly against those old theories.

Gerardo



**Certified  
Conveyan  
cer**

01/02/2014 at 12:19 pm

This is important for consumers, so they understand how media influences them and what tricks creators use to convey their meanings to their audiences. It's also important for creators.



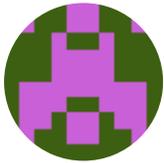
**CaptainKr  
aft**

09/12/2013 at 3:42 pm

It's cool to read about some things that many people don't know are related to making games because it gives us a different perspective.

^  
[Back  
to Top](#)

I like to read definitions like this because I feel like it helps me understand more about what I love to do. Thanks



★ admin

09/15/2013 at 5:30 am

Cool, glad it helps. The terms here will be thrown around quite often in the future, so I thought I write them up quick.

